

Palm Sunday – April 1, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
Luke 22:39 – 23:56 – The Passion of Our Lord

The Rev. Kent Higgins

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The words of the dying Jesus, spoken from the cross. Not comfortably spoken, for every breath took effort, and the real, physical pain Jesus was suffering kept his sentences short. And it took time to recover from each one, until finally he did not recover, but “breathed his last.”

These are words that many of us have heard all our lives. Perhaps we have heard them so often that we have stopped listening. It’s a very human failing to not listen, especially when we know what’s coming next.

But for whom is Jesus asking forgiveness? Perhaps we assume it is for those who have betrayed, captured, tortured, condemned, and killed him. Yes, that’s comfortable. Jesus is on his cross, all that time ago, because somebody else put him there. Certainly, you and I had nothing to do with it.

But were we not the ones who just called out “Crucify him”? Oh, we’re just actors in a drama. We didn’t drive those nails into his flesh. Can we make that assumption? I don’t think so, for if we believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and for the sins of all mankind, aren’t our sins real? Mine seem very real to me, and I believe that Jesus willingly suffered on Calvary for my sins, for if he did not, then how are my sins to be atoned for? Surely not by my own merits.

I submit to you that the sacrifice of Jesus is an on-going process. Protestant theology holds that the Eucharist is a memorial, a remembrance, and indeed our liturgy contains “do this in remembrance of me.” An entirely Protestant statement,

But at the same time, we say of the bread “This is my body” and of the wine “This is my blood.” And in the words of administration largely unchanged from the time of the first Queen Elizabeth, we say, “The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee,

and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.” Likewise we say in offering the cup of wine, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto eternal life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ’s blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.”

Jesus on the cross is both sacrificial victim and the priest offering that sacrifice to God, “...a full and perfect sacrifice for the whole world.” The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross occurred once for all mankind, and in the sacrifice of the mass, the Eucharist, we acknowledge the continuing effectiveness of that sacrifice. The passion of our Lord is relived each time we gather to receive the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Jesus.

So who does Jesus forgive from the cross? Thanks be to God, he forgives me, and each of you, and all of creation. In our pride, perhaps, or maybe just in our familiarity with the story, we assume that Jesus is speaking only to those who directly brought him to Calvary.

We need to open our hearts and our minds, especially now in this coming week, for we will relive the final days of Jesus on this earth. This Thursday, some of us will be able to gather here to remember the last time Jesus broke bread with his disciples. That night, we will empty our church of its adornment as we watch and wait for the death of Jesus on the cross.

On Good Friday, we will relive some of the events at the cross, and we will hear again Jesus speaking to us in those last words. And then we will endure our own isolation. Jesus lies dead in the tomb. All through Holy Saturday, we are paralyzed because our Lord is gone, and we do not know where to find him.

And on Easter morning, we will feel the insult to his memory, for not only is Jesus dead, but also his body has been taken away. You know what happens next. You know that Jesus is not dead, but risen from the grave, freed from the tomb. The Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world.

Whose sins? Who does Jesus forgive from the cross? Our sins are forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of his sacrifice. Our salvation is not some piece of history thousands of years ago. Our salvation is here and now, just as it was there and then. “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty. For all that is in heaven and earth is thine. Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all.”